

VZCZCXRO2259  
RR RUEHAST RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHLH RUEHLN RUEHPW RUEHVK RUEHYG  
DE RUEHTA #0485/01 0720452  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 120452Z MAR 08  
FM AMEMBASSY ASTANA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1957  
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE 0432  
RUCNCLS/SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 1876

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ASTANA 000485

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN - MARTY O'MARA

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [KDEM](#) [KZ](#)

SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN BEGINS THE DIFFICULT AND DELICATE TRANSITION  
FROM RUSSIAN TO KAZAKH

-----  
Summary  
-----

[¶1.](#) (SBU) Kazakhstan is slowly transitioning from Russian to Kazakh as the primary language of governance. Spoken by only a minority of Kazakhstanis at the time of independence, demographic shifts and government programs have increased the prevalence of Kazakh in Kazakhstanian society. However, the transition to Kazakh has been plagued by delays and many hurdles remain which the government will have to surmount before Kazakh becomes Kazakhstan's primary language. Kazakhstan's Russian-speaking minority groups have not strongly opposed the move to Kazakh, although this may change if language requirements significantly limit their job and educational opportunities in the future. End Summary.

-----  
Kazakh: "State Language," But Proficiency Lags  
-----

[¶2.](#) (U) At the time of Kazakhstan's independence, ethnic Kazakhs constituted a minority of the country's population. (Note: "Kazakh" refers to the ethnic Kazakh population of Kazakhstan and the Kazakh language. "Kazakhstani" is the term for a citizen of Kazakhstan without regard to ethnicity or native language.) Beginning during the Russian Empire, and then accelerating throughout the Soviet period, successive waves of non-Kazakhs came to inhabit present-day Kazakhstan, largely through Stalin's deportations and Khrushchev's Virgin Lands campaign. These migrations coupled with the linguistic Russification of urban Kazakhs firmly entrenched the Russian language in Kazakhstan to a greater degree than any of the other Central Asian republics.

[¶3.](#) (U) At the time of Kazakhstan's independence, the Kazakhstanian government adopted the principle that promoting Kazakh was an important element of state-building and establishing the country's Kazakh identity. The 1993 Constitution proclaimed Kazakh as the "state language" while Russian -- the tongue of the majority of the populace and, in practical terms, the language in which business was done -- was relegated to the status of the "language of interethnic communication." The 1995 Constitution uses an even more ambiguous formulation, with Article 7 stating that Kazakh is the state language but Russian is to have equal status.

[¶4.](#) (SBU) Today, Kazakh is more prevalent than it was at the time of independence. Emigration of non-Kazakh-speaking minority groups and higher ethnic Kazakh birthrates have altered Kazakhstan's demographics in favor of its Kazakh population. Moreover, even if they do not speak it at home, young people are more likely to learn Kazakh than they were a generation ago as a result of the growing number of primary and secondary Kazakh-language schools.

Nevertheless, Russian remains the lingua franca in Kazakhstan. Approximately 30 percent of ethnic Kazakhs speak little or no Kazakh and few non-Kazakhs -- who at present represent just under half of the country's overall population -- are proficient in the language. In a 2005 USG-funded poll of 1500 Kazakhstanis, 70 percent of those polled in person elected to respond to the survey in Russian.

-----  
State's Switch to Kazakh Hampered  
-----

15. (SBU) The Kazakhstani government's objective is to make Kazakh the sole language of internal government documents, according to Professor Dr. Yerden Kazhybek, the Chairman of the Committee of Languages in the Ministry of Culture and Information. At the same time, Russian translations of public documents would be made available, if there is demand for such versions, he explained. Kazhybek contended that three-quarters of the government's ministries and 61 percent of regional administrations have made the transition to Kazakh.

16. (SBU) Efforts to use Kazakh as the language of governance have, however, been hindered by the high number of civil servants who speak no Kazakh or are not sufficiently proficient to function in the language in an office environment. Stories have circulated about internal government documents being written in Russian, translated into Kazakh for transmission to another government department, and then immediately translated back into Russian at their destination. Moreover, while translation bureaus placed in government ministries were intended to remain in place only until the ministry in which each was located officially made the switch to Kazakh, many have remained in place after the target date passed. Because of these problems, Kazhybek admitted that the transition had slowed the "functioning of agencies" as the agencies simply reduced the number of documents they produced and encountered other problems

ASTANA 00000485 002 OF 003

operating with Kazakh as the language of business.

17. (SBU) Plans to rectify these issues by providing Kazakh language instruction to civil servants have also run into problems. Though many Kazakhstani government agencies do provide such courses, they have been limited by a lack of qualified Kazakh language teachers. Moreover, available Kazakh instructional materials are of poor quality and many civil servants have simply refrained from making the effort to attend, according to Kazhybek.

18. (SBU) During the Soviet period, Kazakh was left to linguistically languish as Russian dominated technical and academic fields. Consequently, Kazakh today simply lacks words for many modern objects and concepts. A large government initiative seeks to tackle this problem, according to Kazhybek. University research groups and technical specialists in a variety of fields have been tasked with developing new terms in Kazakh. These terms are then vetted by Kazakh linguists and submitted for approval to the Institute of Linguistics. The final stage of authorization for new terms is the Special National Terminological Committee. However, this initiative is far from complete and often even native Kazakh speakers are not comfortable discussing technical subjects in Kazakh because they generally received a higher education in those fields in Russian.

-----  
Promoting Kazakh Among the Populace  
-----

19. (SBU) In addition to its plans to transition to Kazakh as the primary language of governance, Kazakhstan has also sought to promote the Kazakh language as a key element of the post-independence nation-building project. In his February 2008 annual state of the nation address, President Nazarbayev underscored the importance of all people obtaining a "deep mastery" of the state language. Toward this end, Nazarbayev demanded that the responsible government agencies improve teaching quality, develop better audio-visual instructions, and improve study tools. Kazhybek explained that over 40 language centers have opened throughout the country to increase public proficiency in Kazakh, a number which is

to be increased to more than 100 by 2010. He added that the government is investing in improving Kazakh instructional materials and plans to launch a web portal which will include a variety of Kazakh teaching tools. However, the language centers will only be able to provide instruction to a few thousand people -- hardly sufficient to allow all Kazakhstanis "mastery" of the language -- and Kazakhstan's low level of internet penetration will keep the new web portal beyond the reach of most of the population.

¶10. (SBU) The government also must grapple with a host of hurdles to promote Kazakh in its educational system. Many parents are reluctant to send their children to schools which exclusively use Kazakh because they are perceived to be less academically rigorous. Most of Kazakhstan's highly-educated teachers teach in Russian, and Kazakh language textbooks are generally inferior to their Russian equivalents. In 2007, Vice Minister of Education Kuliash Shamshidinova complained publicly about these shortcomings. Nazarbayev remarked in his 2008 state of the nation address that the number of Kazakh language publishing houses must be increased so that competition can foster the development of better textbooks. The situation is not much better in the commercial marketplace. Browsing the shelves of the growing number of modern bookstores in Almaty and Astana suggests that there is at best a tiny supply of Kazakh-language books available.

-----  
Balancing Minority Concerns and Kazakh Nationalism  
-----

¶11. (SBU) Kazakhstan's government is caught between its aim of strengthening Kazakh identity and a desire to avoid alienating the various minority groups which collectively constitute almost half of Kazakhstan's population, all of which speak Russian as their primary language. To assuage the concerns of the country's non-Kazakh speakers (and as an acknowledgement that many ethnic Kazakhs also do not speak fluent Kazakh), Kazakhstan's transition to Kazakh has been repeatedly delayed. Moreover, the government has maintained considerable flexibility in its language requirements for civil servants because it wants to keep the issue from becoming unduly divisive, according to Kazhybek. This is a priority for Nazarbayev, who stated in an August 2007 speech that discrimination against those who do not speak Kazakh is unacceptable.

¶12. (SBU) Kazakh nationalists, on the other hand, are increasingly frustrated by the slow pace of linguistic transition. They believe that ethnic Kazakhs and the Kazakh language remain under threat in Kazakhstan. The National Front to Fight for the Status of the

ASTANA 00000485 003 OF 003

Kazakh Language was recently founded to press the government to speed the transition, though it remains to be seen whether this organization will follow through with a threat to launch protests if its demands are not met.

-----  
Comment  
-----

¶13. (SBU) Though Kazakh nationalists and minority rights organizations both feel aggrieved by the government's current policy, mainstream Kazakhstani public opinion does not yet seem to be divided over the issue. However, this could change in the coming years, particularly if the government opts to strengthen Kazakh language requirements for civil servants or for graduation from or entry to educational institutions. As government efforts to transition to Kazakh begin to affect a wider portion of the populace, the prospects for vocal opposition to the program could increase. Considerable doubt remains as to whether Kazakhstan's minority groups -- particularly the sizable Russian population -- will ever learn Kazakh. Moreover, the lack of an effective program of Kazakh-language education in Russian-language schools only perpetuates the problem for generations to come. End Comment.

ORDWAY